

The Story of a 21st Century 'Somebody': Independent Culture Creation in the 2000s & 2010s

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TaraElla also maintains a blog and (upcoming) show inspired by the Princess's Spirit, called The TaraElla Show.

Visit **www.taraella.com** to find out more.

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This book is based upon the personal experience of the author. Events are described as the author experienced them, and as she remembers them. The actual accuracy of events and dates in the book are not guaranteed in any way. However, if there is any error, it is unintended.

Chapter 1

1.1 The World As It Was

Let me start from the beginning. We must remember how things were, once upon a time, or really not that long ago, if we are to appreciate where we are now, and what happened to bring us here.

As human beings, most of us would like to think that we are special, in some way. Most of us would like to think that we have something unique, to contribute to the world. My mother, Nancy, taught me from a young age that I should aim to not 'live and die anonymously'. However, for most of humanity, most people were destined to live and die very much anonymously, as just one small part of a large system, indistinguishable from the next small part. To be 'somebody' in this world, a somebody whose opinions would be heard in

any way beyond close friends, was a privilege very few had enjoyed.

Part of why the world had long been the way it was, was because of the limitations of the way people 'communicated' back then. For newspapers, radio stations and television channels to be profitable, there can only be a very limited number of each. In fact, regarding radio and TV, governments only issue a very limited number of licences to begin with, meaning that most people only had access to a dozen or so radio stations and a handful of TV stations. This situation only changed slightly in recent years, with the rise firstly of cable television in the 1980s and 90s, and then the replacement of analog TV with digital TV, which allowed more stations to be broadcasted. But still, the opportunity to 'broadcast' was very limited, and it was rationed out only to people whom the elite deemed worthy.

For example, in the old media, for a musician to gain audience, they had to have access to radio air time. This access is generally 'locked up' completely by big record labels, so no matter how good your stuff was, you could only play it at pubs, if the big labels gave you no time. It was also quite difficult to build a loyal following or show your 'uniqueness' adequately. Whilst 'celebrities' promoted by big media had the required avenues to impress upon others their carefully crafted 'images', most independent artists simply had no such chance to even be understood properly at all, when all they could do is to perform at shows randomly across their region, to audiences who mostly haven't heard of them before and will not hear about them again. Similarly, the only people whose political opinions could be widely shared were those published in newspapers and magazines, and you would have to first impress the editor if you were to even get a 'letter to the editor'

published. Besides, there was no way for most people to have an ongoing 'opinion column' that can be read by the public of any kind, unless they were contracted to do so by a media organisation. You just can't build a following, let alone a cultural or political movement, by random letters to the editor.

In this environment, there would eventually be no point for most people to continue to think of themselves as a 'unique individual'. There was a very clear divide between celebrities, established journalists and opinion leaders on one hand, and the rest of the population on the other hand. The former were clearly distinguishable 'somebodies', the latter were indistinguishable 'nobodies'.

I literally think that not having a voice in this world counts as oppression, and hence most of humanity had been technically oppressed,

though they did not know it. Just like how most people in history would not have even dreamed of much of what we take for granted as 'human rights' nowadays. It's the way human history has always been.

And beyond the selfish need to tell the world about yourself, the old world order had wider societal implications too. Whoever holds the power to get heard by the public also holds the key to control culture itself, ultimately. Hence in that old world, very few elites and their agenda would control the thinking of much of the population. Their views would be broadcasted via a variety of media and would dominate what people would hear. The media may change over time, from newspapers to radio to television, but in essence, it's the same model of an elite few having the chance to speak up, and the majority having the chance to only listen. No wonder the culture of decades and centuries gone by were so conformist, and

minority groups and views had so little (essentially no) representation. In such an environment, it was also no wonder that only the mainstream, conventional and privileged were represented in culture, and the rest were disenfranchised.

This situation didn't just exist long ago. It was still so during my childhood, and indeed it was largely still so during my teenage years, as the world moved into a new century. My 2006 short novel *Eastlands Dreaming* was about imagining a future where culture creation was completely democratised. Are we there yet? I can't say for sure, I think we still have some way to go, but at least we've made great steps forward. When I first started a blog in 2003, most people hadn't even heard of blogs. It surely looks amazing in hindsight, how far we have come in less than two decades.

Throughout this book, I will be telling my own story so far, as a cultural voice in this rapidly changing world. But I will also be illustrating the wider story of how profoundly the world changed, in these first two decades of the 21st century. The technology changed first, and that was groundbreaking enough, but I think that the greatest change was in the culture. See if you agree with me.

1.2 It All Started With Technology

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. For example, I would like to hope that, one day in the distant future, the cultural changes gradually brought on by technological development will end all wars once and for all.

Technological changes also affect the way we live and experience the world, and the ongoing story of technological progress can often be interwoven with anecdotes from people living through these changes, providing the human side to this otherwise very technical story. For

example, my father recalls of a time when, to watch a football match, one would have to go to the local park and sit in front of its giant screen, as there were no televisions at home. I myself have always watched the world cup on TV, as it was more convenient, and nowadays my father and grandfather also do the same. Similarly, my mother recalls the first few months of getting a black and white TV set back in the 1960s, she would stay glued to the screen until they ceased broadcast around midnight every day (TV stations didn't broadcast in the middle of the night until the 1990s, I can still remember TV Guides having the listing 'Close' back when I was very young). Surely, kids today have much more to look forward to than the TV. It just shows how life changes, and the most exciting things often become boring in a few decades' time.

Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most

groundbreaking developments of all, in our times. Previous generations had different groundbreaking technology, but I believe none matches up to this. And it's interwoven with our own stories too, just like the generations who came before. For example, when I was recently doing my PhD, I reflected on the fact that we are so lucky to have access to almost any academic journal we want online, and read any article from any issue with several clicks of the mouse.

Convenience surely is a major benefit of recent technological changes, and it's the dimension many people have focussed on thus far. But in my view, the ability of anyone to start having a cultural voice is the true revolution. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. There's still a whole story to tell, before we reach that conclusion.

Before any of that convenience and cultural change became reality, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit *I Wish I Was a Punk Rocker* actually contained the line 'when computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven. Whilst I can understand why the aforementioned type of

computer would be scary to many people (I tried to teach my mother who never understood any of it), for me, as a kid, it was better than any toy they had in the 90s.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the internet. Back then, internet speeds were really slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. But for 12-year-old me, it was amazing enough that I was reading what everyday people halfway across the world were saying. If I added something to a discussion, someone halfway across the world might read it while I was sleeping, and reply to it. Just this thought

made the world seem like a less lonely place. The internet meant that the world had truly 'become one'.

And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was almost an every week thing. Sad to say that, in the 14 years since, the computers themselves had improved much more slowly, but then, it would be in this period that the 'real' revolution would begin. The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the

beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological advances in the late 90s and talk of internet speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation),

there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. One emerging use, the most groundbreaking in my opinion, was the ability to build a cultural platform, communicate with people, gain an audience, and do all of that independent of big media corporations' approval. Independent musicians were one of the first groups to embrace this idea, sometimes by simply informing people where they would play at shows next, and sometimes even sharing their music via the internet, although the slow speeds meant this was usually of poor quality. It allowed them to connect with their fans and build a following, in a way that mainstream media had denied them. Blogs, or weblogs, regularly updated webpages, were another phenomenon that raised its head around the turn of the century, and gradually spread from the geeks to the mainstream. It allowed people to have what is essentially a regular opinion column, something previously limited to cultural elites.

As a teenager I decided to be an independent musician, and as a semi-geek also saw the great opportunities the internet could provide in that regard. But I wasn't ready to make music yet, so that was still somewhere in the future.

However, a blog could be easily set up in under an hour, and blog posts would only take an hour or less out of each week, so it was a thing that you could start doing anytime you wanted. Besides, I figured out that as a musician I would like people to really get to know me, as the artist behind the music is an important part of the music, so the blog would fit into my musical plans neatly in the future. With that in mind, I started my blog in August 2003. It had a very basic design, and I posted every now and then, about everything from world affairs to celebrities to politics (that was how most personal blogs were back then, and it might still be this way today actually). Of course, my blog

is more sophisticated today. But those few posts did mark the start of a long term habit.

Chapter 2

2.1 The Golden Age of Reality TV

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series *The Hunger Games* was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critiques who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and its appeal was two-fold: firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol (2002-2016) showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were transgendered. As a fan of many reality shows

including the Idol franchise (Pop Idol, American Idol, Canadian Idol and Australian Idol), Big Brother and Amazing Race amongst others, this dual appeal of both 'more ordinary' and 'less ordinary', both 'more relatable' and 'more interesting', was definitely a big factor in the interest.

While the internet became popular in the late 1990s and blogs were in widespread use by the mid 2000s, in reality, TV was still king during this period. There were two reasons for this: firstly, internet speeds were slow to begin with, and the situation only improved when 'broadband internet', which was typically 5-30 times faster than 'dial-up internet', became available. Broadband internet was first available in the late 1990s, but it was very expensive back then, and even in well developed cities in developed countries, most people only gradually signed up to broadband in the following decade. For rural areas it was

even slower. It was this uneven coverage that prompted Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to start the plan for a National Broadband Network in 2007, but almost a decade later, as of this writing, the project is only rolling out slowly. Whilst music and videos can be 'streamed' over dial-up connections, it was generally of very poor quality. For example, with music videos, the sound may not be clear and crisp, and you may not even see the singer's face clearly. The popular video sharing site YouTube was not launched until 2005. In reality, there wouldn't be much point before that time anyway, when only relatively few people had broadband internet. Secondly, old habits die hard. To this day (2016) my parents still prefer to receive the news from the TV. Even as technology had enabled it, the sharing and viewing of multimedia content on the internet had to gradually grow year-by-year, until the point where many people would spend more time on the internet than in front of the TV (we only reached this point quite

recently). For these two reasons, TV was still king until very recently.

But while TV was still king, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. Definitely not fast enough for people like myself, who were hoping to gain an audience solely using the internet. And of course it was an uphill battle. My website and blog had no multimedia content in the mid 2000s, as having such content would make it unable to show for non-broadband users (i.e. the majority). It only had text and a few photos, like most websites back then. Certainly inadequate for introducing someone to the world. Today, the internet is an important, and sometimes the main, avenue of acquiring and connecting with audiences, for many artists, writers, musicians and culture creators, myself included. But back then, most websites had a more 'facilitating' purpose. In many cases, people who already knew about a certain show

or a certain person would be able to find out more about them on their website, perhaps join a discussion on their 'message board'. Most audiences were not acquired via the internet, but the internet provided an opportunity for further information and connection, like finding out when a band would play near you.

While this wasn't the revolution people like myself were hoping for, it did change culture, and more than what I felt at the time, looking back in hindsight. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how

things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on. Moreover, contestants were often able to gain an internet following from the 'fan clubs' that develop on the shows' website forums, some of which may transfer to their own websites once the show ends. In ways like these, reality TV was already showing the way of future culture creation: involving characters which are real and approachable, and where the future can be interactively shaped by the audience.

In conclusion, in an age where TV was still King, reality TV was at least the first step towards democratisation of culture, and it was for this reason that I and many others found it appealing. It was still imperfect in that the only 'cultural creators' that could participate were

the dozen or so people the producers selected every year for each show, but that was at least better than having only celebrities approved by the cultural elites to select from. The future would be even more exciting, but we should be able to say that this was how the revolution started.

2.2 The Rise of Everyday People and Changing Attitudes to Fame

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. But this is not true, because even in the past, celebrity was often unearned and undeserved, and in my (and many others') opinion, many reality 'stars' were more deserving of recognition than their contemporary celebrities. Celebrities were like overlords because only they could have the aforementioned characteristics and nobody else could, but it was never really the case that

they were the only ones who deserved to have those characteristics. It was more like that the elites only wanted to grant the scarce opportunity (under the old media) to have those characteristics to people with the right connections (and perhaps the right amount of money). It was only now that people began to realise that it was not only the rich, glamorous and famous that deserved to be looked up to. That it was not only the musicians who received huge airplay who had the greatest talent. That it was not only talk show hosts who had the most interesting opinions on world issues. And so on.

Of course, all this also meant that an increasing number of young people believed that had what it takes to 'become famous', whatever it may mean (I hate using that term because it is ultimately vague and meaningless). Again, many traditionalists complained that reality TV made young people delusional about taking the

quick path to getting rich via being a reality TV star, avoiding hard work. But I did not, and still do not believe this is the case at all. Aside from the fact that most reality TV stars don't make it rich (typically only the winner gets prize money), who said it was all about money anyway? Maybe the older generations really don't get us, but many people in my generation (myself included) do lots of things not for the money. In fact, we often actively do hard work, not seeking money in return, like how I did two masters degrees and a PhD not expecting that it would increase my lifetime earnings, or like how all my other work, like this book (as well as all my other books, all my music, and my blogs), isn't aimed at making money at all either. We do things because we want to, because we have a passion about things. And I believe these young people were the same. They probably just wanted to contribute to our culture, to be a somebody rather than a nobody, to having a unique voice rather than to be taken for granted, and in that era where TV was still king

and bloggers like myself often felt like they were screaming into thin air, reality TV surely sounded like a great opportunity (especially for those who didn't properly calculate the odds of getting selected by the producers, but that's another matter).

In fact, I believe it is in many people's nature that they want to be a 'somebody' with 'something to say to the world', rather than just another anonymous being. It was just that there wasn't much opportunity for your average citizen to pursue this dream until recently. Many people therefore decided to put their energies to pursuits that would make them special in some other way, for example in my mother's case being one of the quite few Asian women who completed a university degree in her generation. But back in the 2000s reality TV seemed to offer an opening, and many young people understandably looked forward to it. Fast forward another ten years,

the desire to compete in reality TV among young people seem to have declined substantially, because there appear to be much better prospects of achieving what they want via their independent efforts using the internet. And further proving my theory that it's not just about the money, today (in 2016) there are many great blogs and video channels out there, whose owners are putting lots of efforts into, without making lots of money (it's hard to even make half an average income using blogs and videos in most cases).

The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example Idol rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the first gate. This infuriated many people

time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. Personally, I admire great talent, especially in music. Even though I must admit that my singing probably isn't the best, in music I often actively seek out the best talent to listen to, rather than just taking whatever comes my way. But this doesn't mean that anything other than the best singing doesn't deserve popularity. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

Overall, I think that the changed attitudes to fame brought on by reality TV were not only a healthy change for our culture, but also paved way for the revolutions that were to come. This really deserves recognition in our cultural history.

2.3 Lessons from Reality TV: The Importance of Profile, and of Being Real

Is a piece of art (including literature, visual art, music and performance art) more valuable in and of itself, or in connection with the artist? I think that, while each piece of art has value in and of itself, most art would definitely be more valuable when viewed with a knowledge of its context. And to understand its context, you must first understand the artist, because ultimately, the context of the art is the context of the artist.

All of this appear to be far removed from the concept of reality TV, often described by self-appointed intellectuals as shallow and appealing to the 'lowest common denominator', in their own words. However, shallow or not, every piece of art or performance is ultimately a way to connect

with the artist behind it. And that's why, even in popular culture, people are more likely to appreciate music, books, TV shows and movies made by people they already know and appreciate. Each previous 'connection' makes the next one easier, and more appealing. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why works from established artists are much more popular than works from previously unheard of artists. In fact, it has been estimated that it takes on average 1.5 million dollars to break a new musician into the market, per country. That's about 30 times the average annual personal income! No wonder independent artists have it tough.

And in watching reality TV, this lesson applies too. In the first few episodes of each season, the show generally focusses on letting the audience learn about the characters. They can do this in a number of ways, for example showing pre-recorded interviews with every

character, special short videos introducing a certain aspect of a contestant's life, or just via the free-flowing conversation between participants. In the beginning, the audience essentially watches a dozen or so people they know nothing much about, and it's not that interesting, to be frank. But once you have learnt about the characters, the show starts to get interesting. It's also why most reality shows are only interesting if you start watching from the beginning, and there is generally no point to start watching in week five, unlike world cup football or the Olympics.

Many political commentators in the 2000s pointed out a similarity between politics and reality TV: that campaigns for presidential or prime ministerial elections have become like reality shows, where the candidates' every move is captured on TV for a few months, and many people simply vote for the person they 'like' best, based on what they see. Many

intellectuals have despaired at the emphasis on 'likeability' rather than policies. Surely, the 2004 US elections, the first to be widely described like this, produced a result that neither the aforementioned commentators or myself liked. But my thinking is more like this: if this is the way the world is, we better learn how to survive, rather than just sit and complain. Maybe it's just that first, you need to connect with the people, so they know what you are all about, in the big picture sense. Then we can start talking about policies.

For independent artists and culture creators like myself, this lesson also applies: you need to let people know who you are, exactly, before they can decide to like (or hate) you (you can try to do your best, but the choice is ultimately theirs), before they can really connect with what you say. With this in mind, I changed the direction of my blogging. Rather than just talking about random things, I decided that

each blog post needed to tell my audience something about who I am, and what I am about (well, not strictly each and every post, but at least it should generally be this way). And unlike on television, many visitors to blogs are first time arrivals, so you don't want people to get the wrong impression based on the first thing they see. Therefore, blog posts can't just be random. They have to represent the person behind the post. This is actually often trickier than it looks, easier said than done. The hot and angry culture wars of the early 21st century, in particular, makes things even more difficult in this aspect. There will be plenty of times I revisit this concept in following chapters, which will serve to illustrate this point.

Furthermore, reality TV highlighted the appeal of the 'real' over the 'fake', more so than any previous mass media phenomenon. As previously discussed, many people like and indeed sort of look up to reality TV characters

because they are 'real'. Many celebrities like to say that they are 'real', but in fact, due to them being part of the mass media money making machine, and their need to bring monetary value to their financial backers if they want to keep their career going, they are often anything but real. While there are indeed reality stars who also 'play the game' and do what they think people want to see them do, the nature of reality TV means that most such people are soon caught out by the audience. Unlike in the world of celebrities, there is nobody to cover for them. On the other hand, the 'real' people, who are often unglamorous, a bit unworldly, and often may not have the best talent, end up being among the most well liked.

Independent artists and cultural creators are in a similar situation to reality show contestants here. They can have the unique appeal of being 'real' that mass media celebrities cannot practically have, or they can be fake, and

without a mass media machine to cover for them, they will soon be exposed for being fake. Due to reality shows only lasting for months but independent cultural careers (hopefully) lasting for decades, there really is even less scope to be fake than with reality shows. It is for this reason that, I believe, we must present ourselves as our real selves, and not what we think others' want us to be, if we want to earn respect in the long run. It is for this reasons that I have said some unpopular things, even knowing that they may be unpopular (the following chapters will visit some examples). If you truly believe in something, you can't hide it for too long. Again, the culture war dynamics of the early 21st century means that saying unpopular things will almost certainly lose you fans and gain you critics, something I have experienced again and again personally. There's no denying the pain when people who once liked you decide to turn on you. But this has not reduced my resolve to stay real, because anything else just won't work.

2.4 Lessons from Reality TV: Personal Stories can Change the World

If all you see is a limited picture of the world, then your opinions of the world aren't going to reflect what's really going on.

Most young people today, at least in most of the Western world, do not see being gay as a lifestyle choice. For most of us, this notion is ridiculous, and many of us indeed find it offensive. Why? Because we can see for ourselves, that this is clearly not the case. However, people who lived 100 years ago are much more likely to have believed that being gay was a lifestyle choice. Why? Were they stupid? No. Most of them just didn't know any gay people, as it was very dangerous to be openly gay. "The truth liberates us, so say it and embrace it," I like to say.

Mass media has tended to favour the conventional, both in terms of personalities and content. Television has long been criticised as having unnaturally low representation of ethnic minorities, for example. The reason is clear: mass media needs to appeal to the biggest group of audiences to make money, and that means appealing to their desire to see people like them reflected in culture. Furthermore, the mass media machine will only create 'celebrities' they think they can reap financial rewards from, and therefore any celebrities they 'create' will be similarly catered exclusively to the majority. Therefore, in a world where mass media dominates and dictates culture, minority lives and voices are ignored.

In the reality TV genre, however, things were a bit different (though not totally opposite): while most participants were of the conventional type, they often include one or two less conventional characters, to make the viewing a

bit more special. For example, the Big Brother franchise was often described by critics as a 'freak show'. However, the fact that a trans woman won British Big Brother 2004 did lead to at least some discussion and awareness around transgender issues, about ten years before this issue gained widespread recognition. I also believe that the inclusion of geeks, politically involved people, dedicated feminists and environmentalists, socially shy people and ethnic minorities who still embraced their own culture in reality shows also changed the widespread perception that these people were somehow 'less cool', which I can say was definitely the case around the turn of the century.

Reality TV showed the world for the first time that it's not the case that people are not interested in minorities and their lives; it was just that they had no way of getting to know and understand these lives. While mass media

tended to be conservative in this regard, fearing financial loss otherwise, the people out there (especially young people) have shown the world that they are better than the elites thought of them. What's even more important is the ability of this gradually increasing awareness in changing attitudes. Unlike when I was in high school, it is nowadays cool to be a geek, to be obsessed with social justice, and to be different and unique. Of course it took more than reality TV, but it was still personal stories and examples that changed attitudes. Knowing this has inspired my blogs and cultural commentary to include discussion on news and other stories relating to minority lives. It is a crucial part of fighting against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry.

Chapter 3

3.1 A More Social Internet Comes of Age

As previously discussed, in the 1990s, technology was mostly exciting in and of itself, due to the rapid release of new hardware and software. It was also exciting in that the rapid advancements and expected upcoming technology like broadband internet held the promise of a very different life compared to what we had back then. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the 2000s, the internet developed many new capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010,

but they were an important part of internet history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of updating and the page would remain the same for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked similarly simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to

be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because uploading them was time consuming, and for the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex,

employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years

earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the need for a message board for some. Independent artists, who often do not have access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion

where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile, however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do,

both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests. Instead, they provided an opportunity to advertise on the site to gain fans, or 'likes', at a cost which was relatively affordable. Thus Facebook turned out to be an even better opportunity for many independent artists. Another social networking site that I did not first appreciate but have since found very useful is Twitter, a website that allows people to post updates, 140 characters at a time, and allows users to follow other users' updates. I originally found the 140 character limit frustrating, but it turned out to be a good way to keep fans and followers updated in a concise way.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great talents this way, including many

instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Sometimes I feature some of these covers on my official blog, because I believe we should encourage independent talent and help level the playing field. Mainstream media won't feature these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

3.2 From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, often people would settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on in other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to actively capture the intense interest of niche populations.

Of course, this doesn't mean you cannot cater to more 'general' interests on the internet. For example, my blogs which talk about news and current affairs are designed for a 'general' audience, not for a particular niche, and I believe I have captured interest from a diverse range of people. However, large sections of the internet are dedicated to serving people of particular backgrounds or worldviews. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and environmentalists, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even ten years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect. I will revisit this fact

several times in the following chapters. Personally, I don't believe an echo-chamber effect is healthy, and I try to get my news from a diverse range of sources ideologically. As a cultural commentator and a 'citizen journalist', I believe this is the responsible thing to do, so that my commentary doesn't become part of the echo chamber.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared

culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions. For example, feminists news and commentary websites have allowed serious and popular discussion of feminist ideas well beyond academic and activist circles in a way that was never envisioned before, and the same thing has happened with the libertarian community. The recent rise of both feminism and libertarianism are thus, in my opinion, greatly enabled by the age of narrowcasting.

In fact, as long as you consciously widen your news sources to include a wide variety of viewpoints and ideologies, the age of narrowcasting allows you to explore and discover a richer mix of ideas. Fifteen years ago, when we got our news and commentary mainly from newspapers and television, the content

discussed was likely to be limited to issues of interest to the mainstream, and the viewpoints offered, even if the coverage was balanced, would only include mainstream views. The mix of ideas I get from my 'news' nowadays is definitely richer because of narrowcasting, and I love it. This rich mix of ideas has also been a useful inspiration in writing my own commentary for my own audience, as it provides me with an endless flow of new things to discuss and explore. The world is definitely a more interesting place than a decade ago.

Chapter 4

4.1 What it Feels Like to Join the Cultural Conversation

In an ideal form of cultural democratisation, people should be able to just say and do what they feel like, to join the cultural conversation. The world described in my novel *Eastlands Dreaming* is based on such an assumption. But the real world does not really work like this. Like it or not, as of 2016, mass media still controls the culture and what people are interested in to a great extent, and if you want to participate in the cultural conversation and remain relevant, you better talk about what others are talking about. Surely there will be some audience for a blog discussing the relevance of the French Revolution to today's world, but this audience is likely to be very limited, because frankly it won't be what many people are interested in, unless some mass media cultural icons decide to embrace the

topic. There is a reason why many blogs out there discuss the same things: it's the same things that are dominating the news, dominating people's conversations, and dominating people's cultural consciences. It's the same reason why so many musicians on YouTube would cover the same songs in the same month, which also always happen to be the songs in the top 5 of the charts. If they didn't do these covers, people wouldn't then listen to their originals.

But then, in a world where everyone talks about the same things, you have to have a unique angle if you want to stand out and be noticed. Taking the YouTube musician analogy a bit further, it's like how almost every cover of a song would be noticeably different from the next one in some way, and I'm not talking about just the different voices. But unlike covers of chart hits, where the worst you can do is to cook up something boring or

unappealing, in offering cultural opinion, if you say the wrong things, people can get really offended. I really wish this weren't the case, but having been on the receiving side of this anger many times, I can assure you that I am not exaggerating. And while I thought the reactions I got in the mid 2000s were bad enough, I think most people would agree that the rise of so-called social justice warriorism in recent years has made things a lot worse (this will be visited in later chapters, as this book is roughly chronological). Having someone say that my worldview is of a 'naive airbrushed Disneyland fairytale' almost sounds like a compliment compared to some of the name-calling out there today.

On the other hand, there are indeed rewards for taking a brave stand, on both major and even minor issues. In my personal experience, it is always rewarding to hear that someone really agrees with what you have said, or that

someone has been inspired by your cultural vision, especially after receiving many less complimentary comments. What I do (and what other writers, commentators and artists do) is ultimately for the people who will appreciate it, not for the 'haters'. Moreover, if nobody ever took a brave stand on anything, not only would the world cease to progress, it would be much more boring as well. Furthermore, taking a brave stand may attract unexpected publicity, which may be a very good or very bad thing depending on each person's view. For example, numerous bloggers and vloggers (video bloggers) have attracted much publicity in mainstream media for their very personal and heartfelt support and defence of certain celebrities or politicians, often to irrational levels according to some people's opinions. (While it wouldn't be in my personality to behave this way, I don't think we should be as judgemental as the aforementioned people, as almost everyone has something they are really passionate about.)

And then there are the haters, which you can also sometimes call bullies. Actually, the two can be different. Haters are not always bullies. Haters can legitimately hate what you say, the cultural vision that you represent, without an intent to bully you. People have hated what I said, and have told me bluntly so. This is not bullying, it's the way life just is, and I frankly prefer the world to stay this way rather than to turn into a world where everyone has to pretend to like everyone else. But there are also real 'bullies' too. There are people out there who spend their time on YouTube giving every video they see a thumbs down, for example. Some of the more extreme ones deliberately leave hurtful comments on the video page too. It is also known that there are people who would go to sites like Goodreads and deliberately give one-star ratings to independent authors, thinking it would hurt them most. In the more extreme cases, this

type of bullying can even become like a group sport, where many people participate one after another, almost as if competing to see who can cause the most hurt. The most extreme case so far would have to be Rebecca Black's Friday music video (2011), which attracted probably millions of haters. There was really nothing to hate about the song or the video - you may not like it, but any hateful reaction has to be bullying. I felt so disgusted by this episode that I dedicated several blog posts to this 'phenomenon' back then.

So what should we do about bullies? I actually think that, apart from the medium used, nothing is really new. Politicians and mass media celebrities have been experiencing these things, and on much larger scale too. It's just that it was such an uncommon experience once upon a time, that our parents and teachers wouldn't have known it, and wouldn't have discussed it with us. Maybe it will be different

with the next generation. Time will tell. But the thing is, nobody should care about them, because we do what we do for the people who appreciate us. I believe politicians and mass media celebrities, many of them who have more haters than fans, have actually always thought this way, and it's logical for them because no matter how many haters there are, it's only their fans that matter. It's also the logical attitude to have for any other participant in cultural creation. Haters can't hurt you if you don't let them. It's not like in everyday life, where you don't want your colleagues to hate you because it would make your life hard, after all.

So this is what it generally feels like to 'join the cultural conversation' and thus also to open up yourself to potential criticism. Is it worth it? I think it is.

4.2 Taking Cultural Stances

As was discussed in the previous section on reality TV, people are more likely to like, connect with, or even to look up to somebody when they feel they know that somebody. It's like how you often had to know your friends before you liked them. But for cultural artists, who only have a limited opportunity to connect with their audiences, this 'knowing' has to be done through several 'snapshots'. For mass media celebrities this would likely be via a combination of interviews on television, radio and magazines. In the case of reality TV participants, this would likely be via a combination of what they do in the show, plus maybe specific short interviews or 'profiles' shown during the show. In any case, all you get are a series of snapshots, from which different people may infer different things about the person in question. It is partly due to this that the mass media machine tightly controls the

'images' of their celebrities, making them even faker. No wonder many celebrities complain that people 'think they know them but don't really know them'.

But even if you are an independent cultural artist, and your medium is the internet, there's no escaping this limitation. Whether somebody learns of you from your videos, your blog or other channels, what they still get is a series of snapshots, although arguably there's greater flexibility than the very limited and often strictly rationed television time allows. Still, people can, and often do, think they know you from just several snapshots. And while some very 'stereotypical' or 'simple' personalities can indeed be constructed from such snapshots, in real life, people are more complex animals, with each person having a unique set of values and characteristics. But in a world where so many people are 'faking it' just to please their fans, many people seem to have forgotten this.

Mass media celebrities have their image fine-tuned by their management, and they are generally told by their management to 'stick to the script', often being a stereotype that pleases their fans. While people generally can't act out a stereotype all the time, for mass media celebrities, any 'inconsistencies' can be ironed out without much difficulty using further mass-media-broadcasted interviews, promotions and activities, even 'third-party endorsements' from other celebrities. Some reality TV characters also try to act out stereotypes they think will earn them certain fanbases, including the religious, the rebellious, the 'down to Earth', the confident and fearless, the care-free, and so on, and you see these types over and over again. (But then again, they only have to keep the act on for a few months, so it looks sort of realistic.) Mass media commentators and newspaper column writers also often try to maintain a stereotyped agenda in their commentary, lest they disappoint their audience and get fired. Therefore, most

commentators are either very conservative, very progressive, or very libertarian, and there is almost no in-between or mix.

I have had my fair share of the experience of people forming positive opinions about me from a few snapshots, and then deciding that they don't like what I stand for after all several months later, and believe me, it is a disappointing blow for me (although to be fair, you could also say that I disappointed the other person too). In my case, the most common reason for this seems to be the perceived disconnect between my strong stance against racism, sexism and homophobia on one hand, and my championing of cultural ideas and values I believe would support strong and stable families, on the other hand. I've even lost count of the number of times people have said things like 'I can't believe you're so conservative' to me, even though I have never voted for a socially conservative party ever. It

seems like my strong support for LGBT rights and my 'just say no' stance to drugs, for example, just don't fit together for them, although this is not even logical. Another way I have disappointed people is through my libertarian leaning views on the relationship between politics and culture, i.e. that the government should stay out of it. I have disappointed conservatives by saying that the government shouldn't punish drug users, and I have disappointed progressives by saying that politicians shouldn't call their fellow citizens 'climate change denialists' just because they have a different view on this matter to us.

In fact, it appears that if you want to disappoint nobody, the best thing to do would just be to choose a stereotype, stick to it, and 'fake it till you make it'. But I won't do this. Why? Firstly, because I don't believe in being fake, and actually I am uncomfortable about being fake. I am passionate about the things I am passionate

about, and I don't think I can hide it. Secondly, as previously mentioned, people actually like 'real', even if some are still not very ready for what 'real' looks like after years of 'fake' coming from the mass media. But most importantly, I wouldn't want my name attached to anything that's not 'the real me'. I am a unique person. If you want the same old stereotypes, I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere. I know that at least some people like who I really am, and that's enough for me.

4.3 Caught in the Middle of the Culture Wars

For the past few decades, the Western world has been engaged in one of its greatest culture wars ever. The two sides of this war are not exactly clearly defined, but everyone seems to agree that there are two clear sides. On one side are the 'progressives', stereotypically people who support civil rights, people who are against discrimination based on race, gender and sexuality, people who want nationalism toned down so that we can all live in a peaceful world of global citizens, and often people who care quite a lot about the environment. On the other side are the 'conservatives', stereotypically people who want society to resemble the 1950s as much as possible, before all this began. I don't think it's a logical grouping let alone a logical 'war', and I believe one day in the future history will agree with me. But for now, this is apparently what we are stuck with.

The tone of politics is severely coloured by this idea of culture wars, and it has actually been 'forever this way' in the lifetime of my generation so far. Social issues are divided along culture war lines, very unhelpfully. For example, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples (which I strongly support) belong on the 'progressive' side, and efforts to address the high divorce rate in society are generally seen to be on the 'conservative' side. Belief in action on climate change is on the 'progressive' side, and negative attitudes to recreational drug use, even if it doesn't involve advocating government punishment, are 'conservative'. Support for equal rights for women and minorities is 'progressive', while wanting abortion rates to be reduced, even if you don't want to ban it, is 'conservative'. The divide is quite strict in some people's minds, and if you don't want to upset people, you don't cross those lines. The political landscape itself is also

divided this way: in the US, the Democrats must almost always champion the 'progressive' side, and the Republicans must almost always champion the 'conservative' side, for example. Candidates running for the presidential nomination of these two parties generally learn to convert all their cultural stances to the stances of 'their side', even if they previously believed differently, because history has showed that more 'moderate' candidates don't do as well.

And it's not easy for other people to reject this culture war dynamic altogether either. Punishment is not only given to presidential candidates who don't 'toe the party line', it is also meted out to other politicians, celebrities, reality TV contestants and independent cultural artists alike. The most popular cultural icons almost always fall neatly into one side or the other of the culture wars, and those 'caught in the middle' are quite likely to suffer the

horrible consequence of being rejected by both sides. Cultural war type attitudes also often factor into whether someone likes a certain cultural personality or not. For example, some people have advocating voting to eliminate reality TV contestants who don't support marriage equality. I for one can't see why you should do this. It's logical to vote out a politician who opposes marriage equality to get one step closer to marriage equality, I'm not sure how voting out someone on a reality show would do the same. People have also expressed disappointment at celebrities not sharing their political viewpoints. For example, many young, progressive people have been disappointed to find out their favourite musician or celebrity is a Republican or would sometimes support Republican candidates. Politicians, mass media celebrities, reality TV personalities and independent icons alike who wish to cultivate a stereotyped image to please certain segments of the population, as previously discussed, must also toe the culture war lines to be successful.

For example, to fit the religious stereotype one would have to oppose marriage equality, or at least allow people to assume that they hold this stance. (This appears to be changing slightly in the past couple of years; it has become slightly more acceptable to be religious and/or conservative and to support marriage equality. But at least up to 2012 it was quite 'unacceptable' to many people.)

My attitude towards this culture war and the 'dividing line' is clear: I wish it doesn't exist, and I'm not going to respect its existence either. Of course, as previously mentioned, I have 'disappointed' quite a few people because of this. But as human beings, and especially as agents of cultural change, we must stand up for our beliefs. I'm hopeful that there are still people out there who will see this as the right thing to do, and I also believe that in my rejection of the culture war divide I am setting an example for others who don't want to

believe in the culture war but are still too afraid to speak up.

I don't believe in the culture wars because it divides people and gets nothing done. Using marriage equality as an example, the journey has been relatively easy in countries where the culture wars isn't a big thing (e.g. the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark). The same journey has been much more painful in countries like the US and Australia, where the culture wars are clearly in play over this issue. What I believe in is reaching out to people. Coming back to marriage equality, I even wrote a whole booklet arguing the case for marriage equality, directly addressing all common conservative concerns I could find, and using their language as much as possible. Most 'progressives' wouldn't even seriously discuss these concerns, in contrast. But if you don't discuss things seriously, how can you hope to change people's minds?

Chapter 5

5.1 The New Players in Elections

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political

biases, despite their claims of being neutral and fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, and even simply informal social network based discussions between people.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became

one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Around this time, many commercial news websites also came of age, and in time, would rival mainstream newspapers in readership. Traditional newspapers, on the other hand, would begin to move online, and may even develop international versions that are only available online (e.g. The Guardian Australia). Overall, the effect was that there were more and more choices in terms of where you received your news and commentary, and the power of major news establishments was reduced considerably.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. The internet and social networks in particular played an important role in the early popularity of

Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who would be elected president later that year. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks. It has been noted that the advantage of 'progressives' on the internet probably outweigh the advantage

'conservatives' have historically had with talk-back radio nowadays.

In this new landscape, as a 'citizen journalist' or an 'online activist', you can potentially influence the outcome of political campaigns and elections by more than just your own vote. I believe it's therefore a big responsibility for anyone engaged in these activities to be well informed, as well as passionate about truth and justice.

5.2 The Rise of Citizen Journalism

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more

negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct among citizen journalists. I believe that, as time went on, those with positive attitudes were generally proven right, and the negative aspects were uncommon enough not to be a major concern.

It was also noticed, even back in 2004, that conservative blogs only linked to other conservative blogs, and liberal blogs only linked to other liberal blogs. In fact, a study was conducted to prove this. Political blogs are generally highly ideological, and they generally wear their ideology like a badge of pride, unlike mass media outlets who often claim to be balanced. This is only natural, as blogs are a narrowcasting media, often catering to niche audiences rather than the 'general public' as a whole.

In fact, the culture of political blogs has evolved over time so that each political blog is expected to have a clear ideology, and often the clearer and more uncompromising the ideology is, the more popular the blog is. The world being the way it is, I decided to start being upfront about what I believed in and represented politically in my current affairs blogs several years ago, by putting a few sentences beneath the blog title. While I don't fit neatly into the 'hard left' or 'hard right' camps, not giving people a clear hint of your agenda would be failing to meet many people's expectations, in this culture. Moreover, if I didn't state upfront what I believed in, people constructing an idea of who I am based on snapshots of several posts may get the wrong idea, especially as other news blogs are often so clearly biased to one side. For example, when I stood up for Taylor Swift's 15 in 2009, people may have misunderstood me to be a conservative, and when I endorsed President Obama for a second term with lots of praise, people may have thought of me as

hardline left-wing. The culture of clearly biased and stereotyped news and political blogs has meant that people often form stereotypical judgements at first sight.

Despite this drawback, which I think time and the development of an even more diverse news blogosphere may be able to change, I still think that citizen journalism has been a force for good (otherwise I wouldn't be in it myself!). At least, we are no longer limited by what mass media bosses want us to hear and think about.

Chapter 6

6.1 I Wished for Political Passion, but I Didn't Expect This

Back in the 1990s, the world wasn't as political as it is now. Even university students were routinely described as 'apolitical', especially compared with their 1960s and 70s counterparts. The War in Iraq in 2003 changed things a bit, but by and large young people were still not very passionately political throughout the 2000s. Those older than us lamented a loss of political activism, and even some in our generation, myself included, wondered if our culture could be more political, as it was in the 1960s, for example. I remember watching the *Hairspray* movie in 2007, wondering if a similar fusion of culture and political causes, especially civil rights causes, could happen again. After all, even back then the majority of young people supported marriage equality, they just weren't passionate

enough about it. It was this thought that led me to introduce political discussions in my popular culture blogs, and even weave political ideals and civil rights issues into posts about popular culture and the entertainment scene. It definitely wasn't very common to do this, back then.

But then, things changed. I don't know what exactly caused the change, or what exact moment the change began, but bit by bit, young people became increasingly politicised. Maybe it started with the Occupy Wall Street movement, a response to the 2008-9 global financial crisis. Maybe the election of the first black US President caused a renewed interest in civil rights. Maybe the passion for marriage equality also played a part. Maybe the new online media, much of it having a political agenda and actively appealing to young people, sparked a change in attitudes. But it seemed that, for the first time since the 1970s, young

people and their culture were political again. And you could see it in popular culture too. Mass media celebrities started to come out in favour of various causes. Marriage equality was perhaps the most popular one to support, and almost everyone supported this cause. But other issues like climate change, racism and refugee rights also got plenty of attention in Hollywood itself. All this also coincided with a renewed interest in feminism, possibly driven by the new online feminist media. People began asking celebrities and politicians alike if they were feminists. In the beginning, most would give an unclear answer, but by 2014, it was very common for celebrities to actively identify as feminists.

It would appear that the times have suited my own approach to culture. After all, if the world were to stay apolitical, there would be limited ability to introduce political discussions in popular culture discussions. At best it might

bore people, and at worst politically charged topics might be seen as unfit for polite discussion (the typical 'never discuss religion and politics' attitude). And indeed, I am happy that we now have a much better chance to discuss political subjects close to our heart. But in a classic case of 'be careful of what you wish for', it hasn't turned out entirely like I hoped it would.

It appears to me that, in this brave new world of political passion, there is now more 'peer pressure' to conform your views with your peer group, your audience's wishes, or what people in general would expect of you. While people are much more comfortable to discuss politics openly now, they seem to be very uncomfortable with contrary views. Maybe the decades of culture war had conditioned people to be this way, or maybe the new narrowcasting media has meant an increased echo chamber effect. Alternatively, several

decades of excluding politics from popular cultural discussions has meant that people are now unprepared for controversy. Either way, I still believe that it was a great thing that the culture became political again, and I hope that this issue improves with time.

6.2 Welcome to the New Diversity

The new politicisation of culture combined with the diverse and narrowcasting nature of the new media has meant that there is a new diversity of political opinions and persuasions. We now have everything ranging from those calling for a revival of communism on the left, to the 'neoreaction' on the right, an anti-democratic conservative movement. Thankfully, both extremes are rare. But even more interesting, are the people who lie in between the extremes, and who may still have an atypical set of beliefs overall.

How many political persuasions are there, really? Traditionally, people and political parties could be divided into progressives on the left, conservatives on the right, and moderates in the middle. More recently, a two-dimensional

diagram with two axes, one running from libertarian to authoritarian and another running from progressive to conservative, has been often used, for example in the libertarians' favourite 'the world's smallest political quiz'. An alternative would be to have economic issues on one axis, and social issues on the other. But in my opinion, neither of these models can accurately reflect the diverse range of opinions out there, in the new media. Even if two people are approximately at the same position in the chart, they can still differ substantially in their political outlook. This is because everyone has a unique worldview, based on their values, beliefs and unique experiences.

I like to think of everyone as having a 'political profile', almost like a personality profile. And such profiles can be complex. For example, my profile would consist of a strong belief in the value of liberty and the government's actions being consistent with the most liberty,

distributed consistently with equal treatment. It would also have a strong focus on eliminating historical injustices and prejudices, like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination. Finally, it would have a focus on upholding family values and the traditional cultural structures that make our families and society happy, but using adaptive and liberal means. The aforementioned values, in conjunction with my previous practical experiences of the world, would then determine my position on various issues. I think most people are not that different, except that they would have different values and experiences.

This kind of model predicts, and is indeed able to explain, the diversity of political views out there. For example, think about somebody who is very 'progressive', an atheist, a dedicated feminist and not homophobic either, but who wouldn't support marriage equality. While I

would respectfully disagree with her, I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that she is faking her beliefs, like some of my friends may do. The traditional feminist position of refusing to support anything to do with marriage, for example, could play a strong role in her 'political profile', especially if she was once active in the feminist movement in the 1980s or earlier. And indeed, I have met many people whose political views are 'more unusual', like the aforementioned case. If you take time to understand their 'political profile', it usually all makes sense, even if you can't agree with it personally.

6.3 The Rise of the Social Justice Warriors

I believe in social justice, and as I discussed previously, I am dedicated to helping end racism, sexism and homophobia in the world. Just a decade ago, many people would have found my passion puzzling. But nowadays, even people like myself have been criticised as not passionate enough about social justice and ending bigotry. In some cases, even very liberal college professors have unexpectedly come under this kind of criticism.

The recent phenomenon of Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) has changed the cultural and political landscape dramatically. The term SJW only came into widespread use over the past few years. (Sometimes it is used as a word of derision by their opponents, but often the term is used by the people described themselves. This term will be used here in a neutral sense.)

SJWs are people who take every opportunity to 'fight against' bigotry, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination, usually but not limited to using their words online to shut down bigots. Engaging in wars of words with 'bigots' are their most common activity, and other common activities include signing petitions (usually online), participating in demonstrations, petitioning for 'bigoted' people to be removed from positions of power, including both government and business positions, and sharing online posts that expose 'bigots'. SJWs often have an attitude of looking for bigotry everywhere they go, and some people have observed that the commonly agreed-to 'taboos' in the SJW 'community' have increased over time. SJWs, on the other hand, have claimed that various recent social changes, including the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision that all states must have marriage equality, and the recent rise in transgender awareness, is due to their efforts.

Against this backdrop, people who are against 'political correctness' have sought to fight back. Libertarians in particular have claimed that people have the right to freedom of conscience and speech, and SJWs are therefore wrong to prevent this, something I generally agree with. However, internet sites and groups that claim to fight against the SJWs have often featured lots of casual racist, homophobic and transphobic speech. It seems that, to protect the right of freedom of speech, some people feel that they have to use it in a way contrary to what the SJWs want, to prove that they have succeeded.

I believe that root cause of the SJW vs anti-SJW war is a lack of awareness and belief in the great tradition of liberalism, and if we want this war to end (I do), we need to reintroduce and reassert the values associated with traditional

liberalism. This has even become a major objective of my political commentary recently. SJWs themselves may not see it, but it is the liberal values of freedom and equal treatment under the law that have carried the marriage equality movement, not shutting down people who do not agree with it. Causing people to lose their jobs just because they do not agree with same-sex marriages will only alienate people. Equally, it is these liberal ideals that have enabled transgender people to speak up and encourage society to accept them, not some SJW movement putting pressure on people to conform. Political correctness is incompatible with liberalism, and will destroy the very values that led to the social progress SJWs celebrate. On the other hand, liberals and libertarians may be dedicated to freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, but when people champion ideas contrary to our values of the equal dignity of humans, we must speak out to the contrary, however respectfully. It is not 'political correctness' to simply state clearly

that we do not agree with any racism, homophobia or transphobia being expressed, if we just state our opinions without forcing others to 'agree with us or else'. While as liberals we must tolerate those we don't agree with, we have our own rights, and indeed a responsibility, to our own freedom of speech and conscience too.

I believe that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of bigotry can be ended. But I believe in bringing people along, not intimidating them to agree. Things can only truly change, if we let the discussion happen, after all.

Chapter 7

7.1 So Have We Arrived?

Looking back, we have indeed come far, in terms of independent artists' ability to create and disseminate culture, and in terms of the ability for anyone to 'have a voice' or 'be somebody' if they only want to. We are no longer living in a world where only the cultural elite can publish books, share their art en mass, make political commentary with potentially great impact on the democratic process, or just share one's uniqueness with the world and gain a following. Anyone can do these things now, and for that our lives are richer and our culture is richer.

Are we where we need to be, however? I suggest not yet. We still don't have full democratisation of media and culture. The 'playing field' still isn't as level as in my

Eastlands Dreaming novel, although our technology has well surpassed the 2006 context of that novel. Why? Because those with the money and the mass media control still have plenty of influence. The top 100 music charts are still dominated by radio hits, and much better talent still doesn't make it there. The bestsellers in books are still usually the ones published by major publishers, complete with paperback editions. The truth is that, as of 2016, while independent artists can share their art with the world, 'be a somebody' and even have a sizeable following, we still can't hope to compete with the 'big names' backed by big corporations. So we've come a long way, but we're still not 'there' yet.

But then, I believe we are only at the beginning of a major change. As I have said many times, old habits die hard, and the cultural landscape takes time to change. I still believe we can get much closer to the ideals envisioned in

Eastlands Dreaming, even though we may not completely get there. This is because, over time, more and more people will adopt a lifestyle that brings them closer to the work of independent cultural artists, and in turn this will bring about a more and more levelled playing field between independent artists and those backed by corporations. For example, the gradual adoption of e-books over time, an area in which we will likely see progress in the decades to come, will greatly level the playing field for independent authors. Of course, those with the money can still advertise liberally. But then, the increasing use of social networks will mean that word-of-mouth may become just as important in the future.

Just as Angelle was optimistic that technology would level the playing field for her in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, I am optimistic that technology will level the playing field for all of us, year-by-year, decade-by-decade.

7.2 Join the Culture, and Offer What You've Got

We are really very lucky to be living in a time where we can actively participate in the culture and offer our angle to the world, even if the playing field is not quite entirely fair as yet. So what are you waiting for? I suggest that, if you haven't started doing so already, it's time to 'join the culture and offer what you've got'. Right now, in 2016, although everyone is theoretically able to be a culture creator, statistically most people are still passive cultural consumers. I think this is a shame. I am optimistic that, over the years, things will improve, as our culture gradually shifts to accommodate this new reality.

I also believe that, in this new cultural landscape, everyone should just be themselves and offer the world what they've got. Everyone

should offer their real persona, their real stories, their real ideas and their real beliefs. We have seen, from the golden age of reality TV to the popularity of many independent cultural icons for just being 'real', that people would much prefer 'real' to 'fake'. The world is also a richer place when everyone is true to themselves. Sadly, some people think that they can become more popular if they fake another personality, another story, or another set of beliefs and values. I don't think this works, personally. My mother had taught me from when I was young to be true to myself and not compromise my integrity for perceived benefits, and I think this has worked very well for me in life, and especially as an independent cultural artist.

Let's put this another way. If you stay real, when others compliment you, you know that they are liking the real you, and this is very rewarding. However, if you fake a persona, and

others compliment that persona, it is essentially meaningless to the real you. Why would anyone even do it?

7.3 Dare to Dream

Finally, here are some parting words.

One of the best gifts my mother gave me was to teach me to dare to dream big.

The world is only the way it is because of dreamers. Dreamers came up with new ideas, and worked hard to make them come true. If we didn't have dreamers, we would still be living in caves and hunting for food. Dreamers are central to every revolution that has ever been, and will ever be.

When I was very young, the depressing reality was that only a small, select elite had a cultural voice. But it was always my dream, indeed my plan, to share my stories and my ideas with the

world. As my mother often said, 'when there's a will, there's a way'. And indeed, there was a way to fulfil my dreams, right when I was ready to pursue it.

Part of being a culture creator is to dream big, to see things that the conventional just can't see yet. If you want to be a visionary, you cannot be limited by the current context around you. You can't be limited by what's currently 'possible', and what's 'not possible'. History and fortune do not favour those whose thinking is limited in this way.

Just remember, dream big, and you might get there someday.

Appendix

Issue Profile: Technology and Life in the Early 21st Century

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most groundbreaking developments of all, in our times.

In the beginning, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit *I Wish I Was a Punk*

Rocker actually contained the line 'when computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the

internet. Back then, internet speeds were really slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was almost an every week thing. The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological

advances in the late 90s and talk of internet speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation), there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the

2000s, the internet developed many new capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010, but they were an important part of internet history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of

updating and the page would remain the same for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked similarly simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because

uploading them was time consuming, and for the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex, employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the

need for a message board for some. Independent artists, who often do not have access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile,

however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do, both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests. Instead, they provided an opportunity to advertise on the site to gain fans, or 'likes', at a cost which was relatively affordable. Thus

Facebook turned out to be an even better opportunity for many independent artists. Another social networking site that I did not first appreciate but have since found very useful is Twitter, a website that allows people to post updates, 140 characters at a time, and allows users to follow other users' updates. I originally found the 140 character limit frustrating, but it turned out to be a good way to keep fans and followers updated in a concise way.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at

sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great talents this way, including many instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Sometimes I feature some of these covers on my official blog, because I believe we should encourage independent talent and help level the playing field. Mainstream media won't feature these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

The emergence of broadband internet and social networks were key to the rise of

independent cultural artists, but it is important to note that other technological developments also helped level the playing field further. These new technologies were originally conceived as ways to make life more convenient, and it was also for this reason that the technologies became widely embraced by the public. But, in my opinion, the most revolutionary aspect of these changes was that they enabled independent cultural artists with limited means to deliver their products on the same platform and in the same context as mass media backed players. This change is akin to the invention of large scale printing presses in its significance, in my opinion.

The first big change was the digitalisation of multimedia content. When I was very young, music and video always came in a physical format, to be bought in a physical store. Music came in cassette tapes and CDs, and videos came in large black VHS tapes. Anyone wanting

to share their music and videos en mass would have to first produce these physical products en mass, at a huge cost to themselves. And then they would have to approach stores to take their product and put it on the shelf. While the first step was already prohibitive for most people, the second step was even more prohibitive, as most video and music stores would only sell products sourced from major distributors. This was understandable, as shelf space was limited, but was also very unfair.

By the early 2000s, it was common for music and videos to be distributed as digital files. The MP3 format for music in particular became ubiquitous. Dedicated MP3 players and similar technologies like the Apple iPod further helped popularise digital music, because they were smaller and easier to carry around than portable CD players and a stack of CDs. This made mass distribution possible for the first time, for many artists. But still, in that age, not

having a physical album for sale in record shops meant that you were 'taken less seriously' in the eyes of some people. Moreover, a substantial portion of the population still were not familiar with accessing music and videos using new methods. Several more years later, things got better still for independent artists. By the early 2010s, paying for, downloading and listening to music digitally had become the new normal. Buying physical albums became the exception rather than the norm, so much that record stores began shutting down or changing their business model. As all music is now delivered in digital files, music from independent artists now have the same format, ease-of-use, and often similar quality to those from major labels.

The other big change was the popularisation of e-books. This happened slightly later than with digital music and videos, and the process appears to be still ongoing as of 2016. E-books

were around even in the 1990s, but few people would bother to read them, as they could only be read in front of a computer. But by around 2009, things began to change. The availability of portable e-book readers, either in the form of dedicated readers like the Amazon Kindle Reader, or in the form of tablet computers like the Apple iPad, encouraged people to start reading e-books. Of course, old habits die hard, and this change is bigger than switching from CDs to MP3s, and will take time. To this day, there are plenty of people who still insist on reading paperbacks. But more and more people are reading e-books. I have been publishing books in the e-book formats since 2006, and the past few years have definitely seen an increase in downloads.

The effect of a switch to e-books for independent authors is similar to the effect of a switch to digital music for independent musicians. As with records and video tapes,

paperback books have to be printed at the author's own cost before being able to be shared en mass. There is also limited shelf space in bookstores, and they typically reject products from independent authors. This is why, in the past, it was essential to have a contract with an established publisher if you wanted to be a serious writer. This is why, in the past, so many people who had stories to tell to the world never got the chance. E-books are therefore definitely a revolution that is happening around us right now, and not just for convenience or environmental friendliness.

Issue Profile: Technology and Politics

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political biases, despite their claims of being neutral and

fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, and even simply informal social network based discussions between people.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in

terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct among citizen journalists. I believe that, as time went on, those with positive attitudes were generally proven right, and the negative aspects were uncommon enough not to be a major concern.

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, often people would settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on in other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to actively capture the intense interest of niche populations. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and environmentalists, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most

of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even ten years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively

isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions. For example, feminists news and commentary websites have allowed serious and popular discussion of feminist ideas well beyond academic and activist circles in a way that was never envisioned before, and the same thing has happened with the libertarian community. The recent rise of both feminism and libertarianism are thus, in my opinion, greatly enabled by the age of narrowcasting.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. The internet and

social networks in particular played an important role in the early popularity of Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who would be elected president later that year. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks. It has been noted that the advantage of 'progressives' on the internet

probably outweigh the advantage
'conservatives' have historically had with talk-
back radio nowadays.

Issue Profile: The 2003 War In Iraq

The anti-war movement was arguably at its greatest height during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s. For the first time ever, young people bravely ignored the traditional expectation that to be patriotic one had to support their country's wars unconditionally, and championed peaceful alternatives. Ever since, it had become much more socially acceptable for a country's citizens to disagree with their government's decisions to wage overseas wars, while still being a true patriot. Indeed, some would argue that true patriots have the responsibility to voice their disagreements in this regard.

Then conscription was abolished, there weren't as many large scale unnecessary wars anymore, and the anti-war movement went quiet.

Until 2003. Described by critics even back then as 'the new Vietnam', and not even authorized by the United Nations, the US Bush Administration launched a war on Iraq, along with their allies, chiefly the Blair UK government and the Howard Australian government. Crowds of Americans, Britons and Australians filled the streets in protest, but these pleas were ignored by their leaders. Opinion polls showed that the UK and Australia in particular had large majorities against the war. Universities in these countries even had student strikes, just like back in Vietnam's days. Although conscription was now long gone, the idea of 'not in my name, not with my taxes' was passionately held by many people bitterly opposed to that war, my 16-year-old self included. Yet we could do nothing about it, just like Vietnam.

But there was indeed something citizens in those countries could have done -

retrospectively. The US and Australia had elections in 2004, and the UK had elections in 2005. All three governments could have been made to pay the price for the war. Yet none did, as all hung onto power safely. So firstly there was the despair that we could not stop our governments from waging an unnecessary war, then there was the despair that our fellow citizens wouldn't even punish the governments for doing so. For my part, 2004 was my first election, and I voted to punish Howard for the war. I did my part. I also vowed to always vote for my values above my economic interests unless those economic interests were my basic survival. If only more people would do that.

Our generation was not there for Vietnam, and luckily. None of us were conscripted by our governments to die overseas, and we have the Vietnam anti-war movement to thank for this. Yet, in those few months in the first half of 2003, I felt like just by telling everyone I was

against the war and signing petitions to that effect (yes, this part of Angelle's story in the Princess's Spirit Trilogy was inspired by my own), I shared something in common with past anti-war movements like Vietnam, especially since I was a university student too. I read up on the history of the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement, in the university library. I felt like the anti-war movement is a continuous ongoing struggle, and will be with us until governments stop waging unjust wars, and that I was doing my part, no matter how small it was. War will not be extinguished in one generation, but bit by bit, we will get there.

Fast forward to 2016. The British government has just released a report, the Chilcot report, concluding that the war was not adequately justified. Many of us feel vindicated. We were right. Upon the release of the report, Australian independent MP Andrew Wilkie called for Bush, Blair and Howard to be trialled at an

international court. It's something that I have been calling for, for 13 years. It doesn't look like happening anytime soon, unfortunately.

p.s. It has to be noted that, the war aside, I actually found Blair to be a reasonably good Prime Minister. Bush and Howard, on the other hand, I wouldn't have supported them even otherwise.

Issue Profile: The Religious Awakening That Never Was

The 2004 US elections was famed for the rise of so-called 'values voters'. Such a voting bloc were identified when pollsters asked people what they based their votes upon. Those who answered 'moral values' or something similar were categorised as 'values voters'. In truth, I believe people should vote with their values rather than their economic interests, unless such economic interests have to do with their basic survival. But the 'values voters' described were overwhelmingly conservative and religious, and conservatively religious, and largely voted for Republican President George W. Bush. Let me explain in detail.

In the aftermath of the 2004 US elections, analysts pointed to the new voting bloc of 'values voters', who they believed were

ultimately crucial for carrying President Bush to his second term. The 'values voters' were generally conservative, religious people, and had issues of religious morality high up on their priority list, chiefly abortion and 'gay marriage'. In fact, it was common to describe the beliefs of this crowd as 'God, guns and gays'. Analysis found that this bloc represented up to a quarter of the voting population, and would surely have made a difference in otherwise close elections like 2004. They were also found to have a high rate of turning up to vote. However, this finding was probably confounded by the fact that there were same-sex marriage referenda running at the same time as the federal elections in most states during 2004. I will come back to this later. But at the time, several commentators even said that America was perhaps experiencing another 'Great Religious Awakening', akin to previous ones that had, for example, inspired the prohibition.

In light of this 'finding', there was a renewed focus on the role of conservative religion in politics. Everything from the way church groups would encourage their members to enrol to vote, to the way conservative talk-back radio and cable television was run, to the rise of new megachurches featuring pop music catering to young people, were analysed in detail. And it wasn't just in America. This widespread concern about the rise of the 'religious right' in politics was even felt in countries like Canada and Australia, where religion didn't traditionally influence politics, and religion was not thought to have affected the most recent elections.

As a young, committed libertarian-leaning liberal, I was of course horrified. While the young people I knew were not part of the 'religious right', media reports made it seem like that the 'religious right' were a large army, somewhere out there, ready to take over our culture. If even the 'adults' thought that it was

true, then it must be true. Decades of enlightenment were about to come face-to-face with a powerful force wanting to wipe it all away. On the other hand, I became very interested in the organisation of the 'religious right', and wished that liberal forces could be similarly well-organised. Analysis of the religious right also highlighted the fact that their relatively strong families, relatively clean living lifestyle and idealistic and ambitious army of young people was part of what made them strong. I was thus inspired to start encouraging fellow liberals to start embracing a cultural agenda of strong morals, inclusive family values, and ambition to improve the world. I had always believed in such values personally, but now I understood that it was important for my fellow liberals to embrace them too. If we didn't want big government conservatism to take over, we must first be morally strong ourselves. To this day, all this remains an important part of my cultural agenda. Great

Religious Awakening or not, these remain solid values for life.

But then, just a few years later, we started to find out that the Great Religious Awakening of the early 21st century probably just never was. The victory of Obama in 2008 was the first clue. Some commentators were prepared to say that the Republican Party would be kept in power by 'values voters' for a generation, but this surely didn't happen. As time went on, this was further confirmed. More and more celebrities came out in support of marriage equality. Surely that would mean the 'religious right' and their 'values' at least didn't have much clout among young people. By President Obama's second term, during which marriage equality support reached majority, it was clear that the Great Religious Awakening of 2004 simply never was. America, and indeed the rest of the Western world, was increasingly embracing marriage equality all this time, which was

incompatible with the picture of a rising religious right. It was a figment of the media's imagination. It just goes to show how we can collectively imagine and fear something that simply is not really happening.

But here's my theory for the whole phenomenon of the Great Religious Awakening that never was: Same-sex marriage, which wasn't even on most people's political radar in 2000, had emerged as a major election issue for the first time in 2004, due to decisions in its favour by the Massachusetts Supreme Court as well as several Canadian courts. Back then, not many people were passionate supporters of marriage equality, but many more were passionate opponents. The inclusion of ballot initiatives to 'ban gay marriage' naturally brought many opponents of marriage equality to the ballot box who wouldn't have otherwise voted, and most of this population was also likely to vote Republican, giving Bush an

advantage. This, however, did not mean the religious right was on the rise, per se. This was also not able to be repeated even in the 2006 mid-term elections, because even though the majority was still against same-sex marriage, the bans were already in place. Therefore, 'values voters' did not play much of a role in either 2006 or 2008. (The 2004 picture also could not happen in today's climate: the Irish referendum showed that, even where voting is voluntary, more supporters of marriage equality than opponents would turn up.) Meanwhile, there was also a concurrent same-sex marriage debate in Canada, and of course the religious right participated in politics over this issue. In Australia, it was probably more of a case of the progressives simply losing confidence and fearing for the worst, after four consecutive terms of conservative government and a recent defeat at the 1999 Republic Referendum. Note that this phenomenon was not observed in the UK or New Zealand at all, let alone Europe. If it had been real, it would

likely have spread to all countries of similar culture.

Issue Profile: A New Feminism

Feminism has had a long (and proud) history of improving the lives of women. Once upon a time, women could not vote or receive equal education. First wave feminism changed that. Still, women did not have equal rights in employment, and many were fired upon marriage. Second wave feminism changed that. Third wave feminism then emphasized women's right to 'have it all' - a career and a family. Many modern women were living this dream, by the end of the 20th century.

For a while, it seemed that feminism had achieved everything and was ready to be historicised, at least in the West. I still remember a few newspaper articles from the mid-2000s, posing the question 'is feminism still relevant now?'. And they certainly had a point: many young women didn't feel that the

feminist struggle was relevant to their lives anymore, and many even refused to identify as feminist, due to the term's association with several radical figures in the 20th century. Feminism just wasn't on most people's cultural radar, male or female.

But by the early 2010s, feminism had another rebirth. Maybe it was the internet 'narrowcasting' culture enabling the rise of a new generation of feminist media. Maybe it was the inspiration of a new generation of feminist politicians, like US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Maybe it was the general renewed interest in civil rights. But things changed, bit by bit. At first, it was not very apparent. There were criticisms of popular culture figures being 'anti-feminist' every now and then. I remember singers and their lyrics being a popular target for this crowd, something I brushed aside as nonsense (I don't believe in political

correctness). A few years into this, I noticed that politicians and celebrities alike started to be regularly asked the question 'are you a feminist'. Most were quite non-committal about this in the early 2010s, but by the middle of the decade, firm responses in favour of feminism had become more common. Feminism has become a popular topic of conversation in the mainstream, in a way I have never seen before in my lifetime.

In general, I do welcome the rise of feminism, as part of the civil rights movement. However, I do have my concerns about respect for the freedom of conscience. For personal reasons, I just cannot bring myself to support affirmative action. I have come under fire from feminists for this. I have also found that the attitude that abortion is absolutely a woman's right and therefore doctors should not be able to refuse has become increasingly common. This is another view I cannot support, due to my

religious beliefs. While I welcome the new feminism, I also live in fear that it will exclude people like myself. I want to see women being equal as much as any other feminist, but I have other beliefs too. For my part, I use my blogs and opinion pieces to promote my own brand of feminism.

For all but two years during 2003-2016, I was a university student. This gave me another perspective on the rise of feminism. During the 2000s, it would be uncommon for students, male or female, to ever discuss feminism. I actually recall having ZERO discussion on the matter with my university colleagues during that time. Surely, it was a common topic for the student union publication to address, but it did not seem to be popular among everyday university students. Today, the situation is very different. Not only is feminism a popular topic of discussion across the board, the discussion is

often very in-depth, taking in issues such as intersectionality, privilege and trans feminism.

As with every rebirth of every movement, things are not always going to be the same as they were in the previous waves. The issue of trans inclusion is perhaps the biggest point of difference between today's young feminists and feminists of older generations. It used to be common among second wave feminists to exclude trans people or even put them up for ridicule, and other feminist were generally silent about this sort of behaviour back then. But in today's LGBT friendly world of progressive activism, this just cannot stand. Therefore, in recent years, young feminists have bravely taken up the cause of trans inclusion against their older sisters, and this has caused plenty of clashes. Today's young feminists are not afraid of controversy and will not bow down to injustice, even if it comes from 'feminist elders'. Another point of

difference is that men are allowed, indeed encouraged, to identify as feminists and do their part. In the past, men were often 'not allowed' to identify as feminists, simply because they were men and did not have the experience of women in society. But luckily, today's feminists have seen that the divisive approach is neither good for women nor for society in general. When Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came out as a feminist, many of my feminist friends cheered him on. More recently, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull saying that he, too, was a feminist was similarly welcomed by the feminist community. I see all of this as the necessary evolution of feminism into a more mature movement, growing up from an exclusive and divisive 'teenage phase' to a more wholesome 'young adult' phase.

Issue Profile: Civil Rights and Marriage Equality

I believe the 2010s will be remembered as a great step forward for civil rights in general. The 2000s will likely not have such a great reputation, but in my opinion, it was where it all started. My view of this history is of course also the backbone of my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels.

Some background first. The 1980s and 1990s were more 'materialistic' decades, where, for many people, making money took priority over civil rights. In these decades, it was known that even many young people voted for conservative parties, for their perceived economic benefit. I have even heard of anecdotes from party volunteers at polling booths at US elections in the 1980s, where the

Democratic volunteers would dismay if young people turned up at a high rate.

Things started to change in the 2000s. In 2003, the War In Iraq inspired an anti-war protest movement, the size of which was not seen in decades. When, in 2016, a British government inquiry found against the justification of the war, many people who were bitterly opposed to the war, myself included, felt vindicated. In the 2004 US elections, while every age group above 30 clearly showed a majority voting Republican, a clear majority of under-30s voted Democratic. Some commentators pointed out to a new generation, 'generation Y' or the 'millennials', starting to enter the voting population meant that young people's priorities had changed. Others were even more optimistic, saying that in just one decade's time there would be much progress on issues such as marriage equality. They turned out to be right, even though in 2004 most people were

sceptical, seeing that more than 30 states had just voted to 'ban gay marriage'.

The effects of this change in priorities for younger voters continued to be felt throughout the next decade. In 2008, young people voted in huge numbers for Presidential candidate Barack Obama, first in Democratic primaries, then in the general election, pulling off a victory that seemed unlikely at both levels just one year previously. The chance to make history by electing the first black president was an attractive prospect for many, but even more attractive was his promise of 'hope and change'. By the 2010s, young voters' preoccupation with civil rights issues continued to change politics. By 2016, it was acknowledged by many commentators that the anti-marriage-equality Republican party now faced a demographic crisis in terms of votes, simply because it turned off too many young people and minorities. Meanwhile, in the

Australian election of the same year, a survey of young voters found that their top three priorities were asylum seeker rights, marriage equality and climate change action. Some commentators even argued that perhaps we cannot get young people to care about issues like the economy without first resolving the aforementioned issues.

The political landscape also appears to be undergoing a historic shift, with the 'left' becoming increasingly left on both social and economic issues. As of 2016, many observers have pointed out that the current platforms of the centre-left parties in the US, UK and Australia are the furthest to the left they had been for a while, perhaps since the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. On the other hand, libertarianism is increasingly replacing conservatism as the dominant ideology of young people on the right. For example, young supporters of right-wing parties generally have

no problem with marriage equality or racial issues, and the younger generation of pro-lifers often don't support actually making laws to punish abortion out of existence. This has not been picked up generally by the media yet, but I can sense that it is definitely happening in my generation. One of the main effects of this shift is that the younger generation is more anti-war than ever before. For example, when former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott tried to drum up patriotism and fear to use the 'ISIS and terrorism' issue to improve his poor position in the opinion polls, there was barely an effect. Commentators wondered why this 'old trick' no longer worked. But look closer at the age group breakdowns in the polls, and you will see that there was indeed a surge of support for the government among those over 60. It was just cancelled out by the massive drop in support in under-35s. Young people were turned off massively. This makes sense, as both new-left socialism and libertarianism are generally anti-war.

Looking back, many of the civil rights battles of the 2010s wave actually started in the 2000s or even the 1990s. Most symbolic of the new wave of civil rights struggle in the 2000s and the 2010s was the issue of marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. The issue first came to political prominence in 1993, when a lesbian couple sued in Hawaii for marriage-like benefits. However, in the 1990s, the vast majority of people were decidedly against the idea - an opinion poll in 1996 found only 17% support across the US. The Netherlands, on the other hand, soon became the first country to legalise marriage equality, which came into effect in 2001. By 2003-4, when the issue first received substantial political support in the English-speaking world, over 30% of the US, UK and Australia now supported marriage equality, but still, in November 2004, more than 30 US states simultaneously passed by referendum bans on state recognition of same-sex

marriages. 'Progressives' and 'conservatives' started to argue about the issue seriously, with the same old arguments to be repeated over and over again throughout the next decade and more. (I played my part by writing a book addressed specifically to conservatives and put the case for marriage equality by addressing every major conservative argument I could find.)

Early successes with marriage equality often came with fears the legislation may be overturned in the future, and same-sex couples either chose to marry at the first instance they are able to, or would rather wait until the legislation is settled. Canada passed marriage equality in 2005, but the Liberal government lost office soon after. Luckily, the next parliament attempted to re-open the issue but did not have enough numbers to do so. Similarly, there was concern about whether the election of a conservative government in Spain

in 2009 would lead to a re-examination of the issue. Luckily, this too had not come to pass. On the other hand, although the Californian Supreme Court legalised marriage equality in mid-2008, a referendum (the famous Proposition 8 or 'Prop 8') invalidated this by November. Existing marriages continued to be valid, but no more same-sex marriages could be performed until the ban was revoked by the US Supreme Court in 2013. I still remember the dismay at reading the news that Californian authorities had stopped issuing marriage licences to same-sex couples that day in early November 2008. On the other hand, the fact that this happened in California, centre of the global entertainment industry, meant that many celebrities came out in support of marriage equality and against 'Prop 8'. The high profile 'No H8' photography campaign, in which celebrities were photographed with their mouths taped as protest, even lasted for quite a few years.

As a new decade arrived, things began to look better. By 2012, both UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama had announced their support for marriage equality, although things would still take a few years to change on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, many people were baffled by then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's unwillingness to support marriage equality, especially as she was an atheist and otherwise socially progressive. She later explained that she was affected by anti-marriage attitudes prevalent amongst 1980s feminists (she changed her position in 2015). Her explanation actually led to quite a few older-generation gay and lesbian people to come out and suggest that she had a point. I don't have figures to prove this, but in my own experience, marriage equality is a generational thing, and even young heterosexuals are actually more likely than older gay and lesbian

people to support and be passionate about marriage equality.

As time went on, the support for marriage equality continued to grow. Before 2012, the pro-equality side lost every referendum ever held on the subject. The November 2012 successes in Maryland and Washington state, both by 52-48, were groundbreaking enough. But the 2015 Irish referendum, with its 62% approval rate, surely was much better. By then, polls had also generally found majority support across the US. By 2016, polls in Northern Ireland and Australia, the only Western English-speaking countries to remain without marriage equality, found 70% support in each country (polls generally ceased to be conducted in the other countries after marriage equality was legalised). Furthermore, passion for the issue continues to grow, with a poll conducted during the 2016 Australian elections finding that 49% of Australians were 'strongly opposed to the

idea of marriage between only a man and a woman', making marriage equality the second most passionately supported election issue overall. This matches my own experience. For a decade, my passion for marriage equality was generally a thing my friends couldn't understand. They were generally fine with it, but couldn't understand the fuss. But more recently, I have met more and more people who are equally as passionate about this cause as I am.

Issue Profile: From Reality TV to YouTube Personalities

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series *The Hunger Games* was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critiques who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and there were shows to cater to every competitive activity you can think of. The fact that many people (including myself) spent hours discussing yesterday's reality show(s) with friends, and the fact that you would commonly hear other people on the train or the bus talking about reality TV demonstrate their popularity during this period. Magazines would also commonly have reality TV 'specials', usually featuring profiles and interviews with contestants. The most popular shows included:

-The Big Brother series: two dozen or so contestants are pre-selected and placed in a house, where they have to live with each other as well as complete assigned tasks. The audience gets to vote to save or evict 'housemates' every week, and the last

remaining is the winner. It is pretty much a popularity contest.

- The Idol franchise: includes worldwide versions such as American Idol, Canadian Idol, Australian Idol, NZ Idol and Pop Idol (UK). It is essentially a singing competition, where the contestants first get quickly cut down to 12 or 13, then they perform songs of an assigned genre each week on stage. Each week, the contestant with the least votes is eliminated, until the grand final.

- The X-Factor, The Voice: also singing competitions, somewhat like Idol, but with also the involvement of 'coaches'.

- PopStars, Fame Academy (UK): other singing competitions

- The Amazing Race: where a dozen or so teams of two compete in a 'race around the world', visiting a different country and performing tasks related to that country's culture on each week of the show. There is no voting on this show; each week, the team that completed the

tasks last is usually eliminated, and the final three teams get to compete in the final week for the prize money.

- Masterchef: a cooking-based reality TV competition.

- Wipeout: a sports and action based reality TV competition.

- The Block (Australia): a renovation and interior design based reality TV competition.

The appeal of reality TV was multifold. Firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become

sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were transgendered. Also, while TV was still king in the 2000s, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the

future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on.

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example *Idol* rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the

first gate. This infuriated many people time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

The popularity of reality TV appears to have somewhat decreased in recent years (mid 2010s). I guess in a world where the internet already offers many real-life personas, especially in the form of online video icons on sites like YouTube, there is now less need for

reality TV. For example, the proliferation of independent musicians on YouTube has reduced the need for a show like American Idol, which finally came to a close earlier this year (2016).

Issue Profile: Internet Based Activism

From around the late 2000s onwards, it has been common to use the internet to engage in political activism. Common activities include:

-Sharing news and opinion: the internet is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source of news and opinion for a variety of activist causes. The narrowcasting nature of the internet also means that, for every major cause, there are dedicated websites and blogs to provide news and opinion. If your friend is also passionate about the same cause, you can also send them the link to any major news or interesting opinion.

-Signing online petitions: anyone can set up online petitions easily with several websites dedicated to this purpose. Alternatively,

petitions can be set up by activist groups or political parties. Signing a petition usually means leaving your name and email or phone number (as per the website's instructions), and the signatures are sometimes actually delivered to parliament or congress.

-Sharing social media content: social networks like Facebook and Twitter have a handy share function, and if you agree with something from a political page, you can share it on your timeline with your friends to show your support. Seeing your friends support something can be an encouragement for you to think about the issue too.

-Donating online: in the new era of politics, political parties and activist groups often use the internet to collect small amounts of donations (e.g. five dollars) because it's easy to donate this way using your credit card. In turn,

this convenience means a large number of people may end up donating, with their small sums adding to a substantial amount to spend on advertising.

Issue Profile: Music, TV and Movies in the 2000s and 2010s

Popular music can either be said to have entered a new phase in the early 21st century. Or you can say that nothing much had happened in this period, depending on your perspective. The availability of digital music is the game changer here, either way.

The availability of digital music means that music never goes out of circulation. Unlike just two decades ago, nowadays you can download music from the 1960s, for example, if that is your taste. People are therefore no longer as confined to the music of their times as in other times in history. Moreover, the proliferation of independent artists, enabled by the digital music revolution, also allows a much broader range of tastes to be catered to.

Thus, there is no one single dominant style of music for these two decades. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) is probably the only 'new' genre to emerge in the 2010s, but even this has roots in techno and dance music of the 1990s and earlier. Otherwise, pop, rock, hip-hop and country continue to be the most popular genres of music, as in the 1980s and 1990s. Also, besides the increasing influence of EDM, there seem to be no reliable characteristics to differentiate music from the 1990s, 2000s or the 2010s. The 'market share' of each type of music on top 40 radio however seems to have varied slightly, for example there are definitely fewer love ballads on radio nowadays than in the 1990s.

As previously mentioned, reality TV is the main 'new' television genre in the 2000s, and its popularity continued into the 2010s, despite perhaps slightly declining. The other big change was that TV shows have become more likely to

showcase gay and lesbian characters and storylines. Shows like Modern Family and Glee are most famed for doing so (it is in fact the core of these shows), but many other shows have done so too. Such characters and storylines were very uncommon in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Regarding movies, the main change from previous decades was the introduction of 3D movies, where movie-goers wear 3D glasses and can see things in a slightly three-dimensional way. This became popular towards the end of the 2000s. Another development was the increasing number of movie series based on popular young adult book series, with the Harry Potter series (7 books about a wizarding school), the Twilight series (4 books about a vampire love story) and the Hunger Games series (3 books about a future dystopia) being the most popular among many more. In each case, the producers have decided to make

the last book into two movies, in order to extend the franchise for another year. It has been anecdotally claimed that these movies have encouraged young people to take up reading.

Issue Profile: Social Justice Warriors vs Libertarians

The recent (mid 2010s) phenomenon of Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) has changed the cultural and political landscape dramatically. The term Social Justice Warrior only came into widespread use over the past few years. Sometimes it is used as a word of derision by their opponents, but often the term is used by the people described themselves. This term will be used here in a neutral sense.

Social Justice Warriors are people who take every opportunity to 'fight against' bigotry, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination, usually but not limited to using their words online to shut down bigots. Engaging in wars of words with 'bigots' are their most common activity, and other common activities include

signing petitions (usually online), participating in demonstrations, petitioning for 'bigoted' people to be removed from positions of power, including both government and business positions, and sharing online posts that expose 'bigots'. Social Justice Warriors often have an attitude of looking for bigotry everywhere they go, and some people have observed that the commonly agreed-to 'taboos' in the Social Justice Warrior 'community' have increased over time. Social Justice Warriors, on the other hand, have claimed that various recent social changes, including the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision that all states must have marriage equality, and the recent rise in transgender awareness, is due to their efforts.

Against this backdrop, people who are against 'political correctness' have sought to fight back. Libertarians in particular have claimed that people have the right to freedom of conscience and speech, and SJWs are therefore wrong to

prevent this, something I generally agree with. However, internet sites and groups that claim to fight against the SJWs have often featured lots of casual racist, homophobic and transphobic speech. It seems that, to protect the right of freedom of speech, some people feel that they have to use it in a way contrary to what the SJWs want, to prove that they have succeeded. This, I really cannot agree with.

Also from TaraElla...

Princess's Spirit Life Ideas #1:

The Dreamers' Guide to Life

This is a book by a dreamer, for dreamers, and all about the dreamers' perspective on life. Whilst everyone may take something away from it, it was written especially for dreamers who are struggling with their dreams, with society's negative attitude to dreams and dreamers, and with the multiple barriers we sometimes call 'realities'. The message is clear: you can and should keep being a dreamer, because not only do you not want to give up too soon, but being a dreamer also helps the world in an important way.

Also from TaraElla...

The Princess's Spirit Trilogy #1-3:

An Early 21st Century Liberty Movement Story

The early 21st century is a time of unprecedented opportunity for those coming of age. It is a time when many young adults set out to achieve their dreams, be it starting their own business, starting a political movement, or propelling themselves to superstardom.

Angelle's dream is to become Cultural Royalty of Pacifiland, thus achieving what her mother couldn't. Her vision is based on freedom, dreams, love and fairness for all.

However, she soon finds that whilst change appears to be in the air, the resistance is often even greater. While the early 21st century is a time of opportunity for some, many people remain left behind, and tension and

dissatisfaction is the order of the day in many areas of life. The increasing pitch of the culture wars, and the influence of global movements from the Tea Party to the Occupy Protests, also combine to make Pacificland a daily ideological warzone. Meanwhile, Pacificland gets caught up in a meaningless political stalemate, with reforms like marriage equality stalled seemingly forever.

With her own dreams on the line, will Angelle stay true to her values? And if she does, will it be enough to make a positive difference? Life isn't meant to be easy, but are there rewards for the brave at the end?